

## Indigenous connection

Gunbower Forest is a large River Red Gum Forest of international significance that has suffered a serious decline in condition in recent years from lack of water. Through The Living Murray's Gunbower Forest project, works will be undertaken to provide water to protect and improve the forest's health.

Local people and many outside the region have a special connection to Gunbower Forest. This stems from a reliance on things provided by the forest, including a spiritual and cultural link that can be difficult to quantify but remains significant.

The waterways and wetlands of the forest provided a ready supply of water, fish and other plants and animals for Indigenous people for millennia.

Two local Aboriginal communities have a particular relationship with Gunbower Forest – the Yorta Yorta Nation, which presides over the mid and south east area of the forest, and the Barapa Barapa Nation which presides in the north west of the forest.

### Capturing history

There are many recollections of local clans living and using resources along the Murray River and Gunbower Creek. The squatter Edward Curr, who occupied land east of the Campaspe and between the Murray and Goulburn Rivers between 1841 and 1851, described a visit to Mt Hope and Kanbowro Creek where the local Aborigines gave him food. He stated that Europeans had mistakenly replaced the Creek's Aboriginal name Kanbowro with Gunbower.

The Gunbower Forest project is delivered by the North Central Catchment Management Authority (CMA) in partnership with Goulburn–Murray Water, and Parks Victoria, and coordinated at a state level by the Department of Sustainability and Environment. It is part of The Living Murray program, a joint initiative of the New South Wales, Victorian, South Australian, Australian Capital Territory and the Commonwealth governments, coordinated by the Murray–Darling Basin Authority. Together with Koondrook–Perricoota Forest in NSW, Gunbower Forest is one of The Living Murray's six icon sites.

Gerard Krefft was part of William Blandowski's 1857 expedition to Gunbower Creek to investigate the natural history of the area. He wrote about the large population of fit and healthy Aboriginal people in Gunbower Creek. "Most of the men were fine stalwart fellows some more than six feet tall and one nearly seven feet in height".

### Heritage sites

Aboriginal occupation in Gunbower Forest is also evident through more than 140 recorded cultural heritage sites and artefacts along watercourses, billabongs, wetlands, floodplains, levees, swamps and lunettes. Some of these include:

**Shell middens** – are deposits of shell usually along the Murray River. They are an indication of the historical use of shell fish from local waterways.

**Burial sites** – for Aboriginal occupants. They can be found in mounds, middens, as single grave sites or mass burial grounds (cemeteries).

**Scarred trees** – Aboriginal people removed bark from trees to make canoes and shields in a way that allowed the tree to live. Evidence of scarring on tree trunks exists mainly in the box woodland.



*Scar tree in Gunbower Forest*

**Earthen mounds** – these mounds of soil are remnants of Aboriginal campsites. They are often in River Red Gum forests on high ground.



*An earthen mound with burnt clay material and turtle shell near Gunbower Creek*

**Artefact scatters** – are areas with concentrated numbers of artefacts such as bone, shell or stone fragments. They are often remnants of Aboriginal campsites.



*A quartz flake found within an artefact scatter*

Surveys are yet to cover the entire forest and it is likely that further archaeological sites exist. Many of these, including burial and natural sacred sites, are likely to be known to members of the local Aboriginal community but are not officially recorded.

Today the Aboriginal community continues its connection to Gunbower Forest through the following:

**Cultural heritage connection** – the ongoing significance of the sites and artefacts described previously.

**Biodiversity connection** – the Aboriginal community continues to use traditional triggers and indicators of river health.

**Ecological connection** – associated with wetlands, River Red Gum, open box ridges (black and grey box), open plains, sand hills and Murray Pine. For example, wetlands are seen as nurseries and River Red Gums as the ‘Guardians of the River’, stabilising the river banks while providing habitat both in and out of the water.

**Commodities/economic connection** – associated with medicinal and food plants, fish species and edible fauna, such as kangaroo, emus and ducks.

## Protecting heritage

The Gunbower Forest project recognises the important Indigenous values of the area. The North Central Catchment Management Authority is ensuring that a cultural heritage assessment is undertaken at each site where construction is planned. All Aboriginal sites, places and objects are protected under Victorian and Commonwealth legislation. In partnership with local Aboriginal groups and Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, plans are developed to protect known sites of cultural significance.

In addition to Gunbower Forest’s extensive Indigenous heritage, many European heritage values exist and require preservation. For further information, see **Fact Sheet 6: European heritage**.

*Historical information courtesy of the Cohuna Historical Society. All photos courtesy of R Jenkins, 2009*

## CONTACT

This fact sheet is one of a series providing information on the Gunbower Forest project. Further fact sheets and other project information are available from the North Central CMA on 03 5448 7124 or by visiting [www.nccma.vic.gov.au](http://www.nccma.vic.gov.au).

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